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Life as Primary Text: English Classrooms as Sites for Soulful Learning

Vajra M. Watson

In *Decolonizing Educational Research*, Leigh Patel challenges us to consider “whether an entity borne of and beholden to coloniality could somehow wrest itself free of this genealogy” (4). In other words, how is education—or more specifically, the school site—both the doorway into social control as well as the window out of it? To answer this question, my work focuses on the pedagogical seeds that nurture radical classroom spaces (Watson *Learning*, “Censoring,” “Literacy”). To put it another way, I am deeply curious about how to co-create classrooms that engage, educate, and empower both students and teachers in liberatory transformational practices. Building on this theme in my own research, I am going to share some examples from the curriculum of a spoken-word performance poetry program called Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS), so I may demonstrate the ways it fosters rigorous social justice instruction.

My research is grounded in theories of social reproduction and resistance wherein I analyze the purpose(s) of school (Apple, “Rhetoric,” “Power”; Angus & Mirel; Bowles & Gintis; Dance; Kozol; MacLeod; Oakes). There are two recent incidents that I would like to bring to your attention as a way to contextualize this essay. The first is a graphically abusive incident that took place at Springfield High School in South Carolina. A fellow classmate secretly videotaped a white school resource officer, Senior Deputy Ben Fields, ripping a female African-American student out of her seat, flipping her over, slamming her to the ground, and forcing her hands behind her back. On camera, he pins her down and threatens to arrest her for resting her head on her desk during math class.¹ The second incident involves a school that SAYS has been working with for nearly a decade. A Grant Union High School student in Sacramento, California, was shot while getting food off campus before a home football game. After being caught in the crossfire of bullets, Jaulon Clavo (JJ) and his injured friends headed back to Grant High in order to get help. This particular school has a longstanding reputation as the most stable institution in the neighborhood. It is not shocking that in his moment of desperation JJ did not drive towards a hospital or police station, but rushed back to campus.²

These two incidents—although violent in very different ways—paint a paradoxical picture of the 21st century schoolhouse. On the one hand, school has the potential serve as a beacon of safety, community, and pride as demonstrated in the case of Grant High. But it can also be a site of control, suffering, and shame as was painfully caught on camera

1. For further details and to view the video: <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/sc-high-school-officer-beats-student-arrest-article-1.2412147>

2. A local news article on JJ’s shooting: <http://www.sacbee.com/news/local/crime/article44816292.html>

at Springfield High.

School is a site of a longstanding ideological tension between democracy and capitalism. Often, schools are simultaneously hegemonic *and* holistic, hierarchical *and* equitable. A lot of juxtapositions exist when we ponder the purpose of school and our role as educators. Like many of my colleagues, I became a teacher because I wanted to change the world. My ideals and romantic notions of school as the great equalizer were challenged, almost immediately when I stepped inside my classroom.

When I started teaching, my students pushed me to think in new ways. I sought to welcome all aspects of who they were and the worldviews that they came to school with. I allowed their views to change me and influence my pedagogy. Together, we investigated issues, debated, wrote, and learned from the text and from one another. But I felt pushed out of the teaching profession. More often than not, I would leave school with tears in my eyes. I would go home feeling defeated.

While my students served as a source of inspiration, other ailments inside the schoolhouse were depleting my joy. As an example, I was standing in line to make copies, and my colleagues were talking—quite horrifically—about one of my students. They were speaking about how this little thug would never graduate and they couldn't wait until he got caught up, expelled, or just dropped out. I could hardly believe one of my brightest kids was being viewed and treated like a villain. I argued with my colleagues who disregarded my ideals as naive. I was told I might reach a few kids but that in a couple of years reality would set in, and I'd learn—one way or another—that (and I quote) "it's us versus them" and I'd have to choose a side.

In retrospect, when I think about my beginning years as a classroom teacher, I was being told in so many ways not to be on the side of students, especially those that were rough, tough, and misled. And why? Because of their demeanor? Their zip code? Their swag? Where is the research that says a person's demographics determines their destiny? We know that a person's birthplace is not the basis of their brilliance. Nevertheless, our implicit and explicit biases shape the culture of our classrooms and the achievement levels inside schools. Moreover, there was a pervasive belief and power structure that suggested being on the side of the kids would disrupt the hierarchy of the institution. How could schools function if students were empowered? I began to ask myself how I could serve an educational system that further marginalized, silenced, and oppressed those it was built to serve.

I hope I am not sounding overly cynical or apocalyptic. I am actually an optimist and a lover of learning, but I recognize that my passion for education exists within a milieu of injustice. Moreover, my research is in response and reaction to schooling practices that continue to be inhumane for not just young people but teachers and administrators as well. Understanding this context is crucial; without a prudent analysis of the institution of schooling, the notion of using literacy practices to disrupt subjugation will remain short-sighted and ill-informed.

I have spent the last two decades trying to transform educational spaces. As my findings will demonstrate, school remains an institution with the potential and power to illuminate the heart, engage the mind, and foster civic engagement. But for these ideals to take root, we—as educators—have to come to terms with both the perils and promise of today's educational system.

Literacies That Liberate

It is worthwhile to acknowledge that English instruction is not neutral; often, it is a gatekeeper by which assimilation and conformity are measured. bell hooks states that Standard English, far from being an impartial tool of communication, “has the potential to disempower those of us who are just learning to speak, who are just learning to claim language as a place where we make ourselves subject” (168). This is an important point. hooks continues, “It is not the English language that hurt me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize” (168). In learning the “oppressor’s language,” Macedo agrees: “We are often forced to experience subordination and conformity” (Freire & Macedo, 23). These scholars describe a complex duplicity of expression, reminiscent of Du Bois’ 1903 concept of double consciousness.

Building on this point, the identity and cultural gaps between some students and the schoolhouse are vast and detrimental, even dangerous. College is a dream deferred when you start planning your funeral at age ten. Dance is adamant: “These students live in their neighborhoods and not in their schools,” so “they must make surviving the streets a priority” (67). Unless we develop effective models to bridge students’ upbringing to their uprising, we will lose to the drop-out crisis more students than we win to college and careers. Young people should not be forced to choose between home or school, the block or class, swag or squaredom—for these choices will, overwhelmingly, not weigh in our favor. At best, we will help a few escape their circumstances. At worst, we will perpetrate the miseducation of a generation.

If your education teaches you to internalize your own oppression, it is harmful. At the classroom level, scholars continue to document the role all teachers can play to disrupt patterns of inequity. Often called “critical pedagogy,” this approach argues that education must be multicultural, emancipatory, and relevant to the needs of students (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell; Ladson-Billings, *Dreamkeepers*, “Good Teaching”). Yet even the best multicultural lessons can sometimes embrace middle-class values in ways that fail to address the particularly disturbing inner-city problems of poverty, crime, drugs, gangs, and other ills. For many urban youth, an effective student-centered pedagogy must acknowledge—rather than deny or demonize—street life (Dance, Duncan-Andrade, Ginwright, et al.). However, many teachers enter the urban environment without any real understanding of their students’ lives outside of school.

Educators need strategies that authentically bring student’s lives into classrooms. For this idea to take root and blossom, new modes of English Language Arts classrooms need to be explored. Fascinated with the tensions of teaching English, I designed a critical literacy intervention that placed community-based poet-mentor educators into middle and high school English classrooms.³ My study examined rigorous social justice instructional models that utilize spoken word performance poetry to create community and unlock learning.

3. For further information on Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS), please visit <http://www.says.ucdavis.edu>.

Phase 1: Understanding the Context

To begin my journey to better understand the teaching of literacy, I partnered with an urban school district in Northern California. In this particular school district, students and their families speak over 42 languages and 82% of the population is socio-economically disadvantaged. Nearly all students are eligible for free or reduced-fee meals. In 2008, over 70% of middle and high school students were not scoring proficient in English Language Arts and only 63% of 10th grade students passed the CAHSEE.⁴ In 2009, the CAHSEE passage rate dropped to 61%. In response to this crisis, Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS), a spoken word literary arts program at UC Davis, was brought into the district to conduct intensive writing workshops in classes where the majority of students were struggling academically. This aspect of the SAYS program pairs a poet-mentor educator with a classroom teacher to implement culturally relevant literacy activities on a weekly basis for an entire school year. Altogether, thirty teachers volunteered to participate and were eager for new approaches. We asked them to choose their hardest-to-reach classes; in many of these classrooms, over half of the students were receiving a D/F.

Phase 2: Seeding Solutions

The SAYS premise is simple and straightforward. Since literacy is alive in the students we teach; if we want to teach them, we have to first reach them in their own languages on their own cultural terms. Building on this understanding, the SAYS Pedagogy is student-centered; in other words, the curriculum is based upon the lived experiences of all of the individuals in the classroom—there is no one outside the circle. Because instruction is based upon real people that are constantly growing and changing, the lessons are dynamic. Given this generative process of literacy instruction, SAYS workshops are highly interactive and help educators 1) get to know their students; 2) excavate literacy practices that students use every day to navigate through life; and 3) foster a critical bridge between creative writing and other genres of text.

Phase 3: Democratic Sanctuaries

During the course of the critical literacy intervention (2010-2014), I observed ELA classes with and without a poet-mentor educator (PME). I was visiting the same teacher, but looking at classroom curriculum and dynamics in both treatment (classes with PMEs) and non-treatment classes (same teacher, but no PME). During the first year of implementation, I spent over 100 hours at these sites to record the ways in which English was being taught and what opportunities students had to read, write and speak. Throughout the initial, first year of investigation, I wrestled with the ways English acquisition was being utilized as a gatekeeper, frequently regulating student self-expression in the non-treatment classes. Far too often, I documented instances in which students were shamed into learning grammar or penalized for writing the way they spoke (e.g., un/consciously using Ebonics). Although the intervention was directed towards the students, it was equally critical to understand the impact it was having on the teachers

4. The California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE), formerly a graduation requirement for students in California public schools.

(Watson “Censoring,” “Literacy”). And, to take it a step farther, I wanted to understand the shift in classroom culture. How did a rigorous social justice curriculum change the dynamics of classroom life and learning?

Deep Learning Through Literacy

As I examined each SAYS classroom residency with my research questions in mind, I documented a pattern. The level of intimate, unabashed communication between young people and their poet-mentor educators was striking. Throughout their creative writing process, there was no need to code-switch. “I feel at home,” a high school student acknowledged. A pedagogy that uses spoken-word performance poetry allows multiple literacies to literally and figuratively become center stage. Instead of educating students to read and use literacy as a form of escaping their environment, spoken-word performance poetry reinforces neighborhood knowledge because it is rooted in the cultural practices, needs, lexicon, and realities of a particular context. For many students, their lives are filled with complex juxtapositions: they are simultaneously insecure and resilient, poor and powerful, traumatized while also healing. My findings suggest that the SAYS literary-arts process reconfigures the classroom culture wherein learning becomes a transformative act.

Irrespective of teacher or school site or type of class (standard, continuation, or remedial), each community-based poet-mentor educator sought to nurture an educational experience for students based upon love and respect. Although SAYS has other guidelines, it was love and respect that foreshadowed all other rules. This love and respect was demonstrated in classroom management styles, including a common reference that the PME knows matter-of-factly that “you kids don’t be actin up like this at home so don’t get to thinkin you about to do it in here.” Borrowing from Delpit, these were not “other people’s children.” On the contrary, from interviews with the poet-mentor educators, it was evident that they saw aspects of themselves in their students; I was repeatedly told: “these students are just me when I was younger.”

Poet-mentor educator and SAYS coordinator, Patrice Hill, goes into detail to codify the role of SAYS in the lives of students. She shares these observations:

Some of us are facilitating workshops at the same schools that expelled us. These experiences have allowed for an intense understanding of the traditional urban classroom and a deep understanding of the way students are often disengaged in the classroom. At SAYS, we possess a diverse and growing group of educators that are reaching and teaching the very students we once were. We are these young people! We sat in the same classrooms, went through the same experiences! Some of us have experienced the same disconnect with school and educators that has transitioned into an intense connection and deep understanding of urban youth, especially youth of color. It’s a lifelong commitment to the uplifting and empowerment of our babies. This calling is indeed the pedagogy of our lives.

When devising the SAYS curriculum, poet-mentor educators are cognizant that they want the classroom to serve as an extension of the neighborhood. For instance, fights on campus are recurring and the surrounding area is often in the news for gang violence. It is not surprising that students’ social-emotional needs and trauma are part of their

narratives. SAYS does not avoid such topics but rather uses literacy to situate learning in the local context of their communities.

Literacy Is Alive

Let me illustrate the SAYS approach by recreating this scenario: today, all desks are assembled in a circle and the SAYS guidelines are on the board. Students sluggishly enter class after lunch. They are met by Mama Laura (as the students call her), a poet-mentor educator, who smiles wide as she shakes hands, gives fist bumps, and even offers a few hugs to each sixth grader. Without direction, the students go to the SAYS box and collect their journals. A few anxiously check inside their notebooks to see if there is a personalized note of response from Mama Laura. With their notebooks and pencils in place, the students take a seat. Mama Laura kindly reminds me as well as the classroom teacher to join the group.

After a momentary check-in, Mama Laura begins the writing workshop in a soothing monotone. She speaks rather slowly. "Write what I am about to tell you in your journal and then keep on writing." She provides the writing prompt: "When I look in the mirror..."

During the next five-minutes, we all sit writing intently in our journals. It is so quiet that the only sound is of pens and pencils in motion. Next, Mama Laura asks "her babies" to share. Hands raise. Within minutes, the classroom is filled with young people's raw testimonies about what they see when they look in the mirror.

Kajal reads to us out loud:

When I look in the mirror, I cry because a side of me is dead inside.
When I look in the mirror, I hate what I see. I'm not the girl I used to be.
When I look in the mirror, I see a black shadow hovering.
But when I look again that black shadow is me.
When I look in the mirror, I want to break it, but I can't so I sit there looking at the girl that was taken.
When I look in the mirror, I stare at it hoping this reflection would go away so I turn off the light and walk away.
When I look in the mirror, what do I see
Is this girl I wish wasn't me.

Alberto also shares,

When I look in the mirror, I see struggle
Because I'm struggling in school
And I'm failing my classes
But I'm trying to get good grades
And I'm trying to stay out of trouble.

The mirror exercise provides an important window into the students' self-perceptions, which inevitably shapes their aspirations. There are no put-downs or laughs. Rather, a sacred solemnness fills the air and the only thing to do is stay present and hold space for one another as each voice takes center stage. These acts of vulnerability are cathartic for the speaker and also create camaraderie amongst the class.

Introspection is not the only medium of self-expression. Poverty is a tableau of inquiry in SAYS, especially because it weighs so heavily on students' lives. In high school, Denise was getting into fights or not coming to school altogether. She landed in special education for being emotionally disturbed.⁵ When SAYS entered Denise's remedial English class, she was completely disengaged, including never having submitted an assignment to her teacher. In preliminary conversations, I was told that this particular student might not even know how to spell her name. Over the course of the school year, we discovered that Denise was highly intelligent but did not care about school whatsoever. "Why should I care about school?" she told me one day. "When has school ever cared about me?"

During the SAYS residency, it became evident that Denise was actually a prolific writer. SAYS offered Denise many things, and her attendance and grades improved significantly. But perhaps most importantly, she discovered a healthy outlet for her pent up aggression. Instead of fighting with her fists, she started channeling her anger into words. The harsh despair that Denise expresses in the piece below is directed towards poverty. The poem illuminates Denise's personal analysis of her own life and the constant communal strife and stress of survival:

I am from a large crowd that is not all the same.
I am from the thud of a body drop after a bullet hits through a little black boy's brain.
I am from whips, chains and physical strains that my ancestors had to go through so
that my people could remain.
I am from D.P.H
The deepest part of hell and the name reminds me of the closing doors of a cell
I am from the thug life looking for a savior
The demons on my block because the devil is my neighbor
I am from the quarter that drops into a hobo's cup or the greedy eyes that look at them
like they're shit out of luck.
I am from the long, long lines of soup kitchen where people fights just to eat.
I am from scattered tears on abused child feet.
I am from a song by R Kelly called I wish I wish I wish and I hope the lyrics come true
as I wish myself out of this pit.
I am from a place where fear and hate conquers our dreams
There you will find what poverty truly means.
I am from a place with lost love where everybody seems to lose faith in you, even the
God above.
I am from a place where the words 'hope' and 'pray' are only used when you have to go
to court trial the next day.
I wish that I could have made this poem a little sweeter before I begun.
But sadly it's just not sugar coated where I'm from.

5. Subjective Disabilities include intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, speech/language impairments, and emotional/behavioral disorders. There is a disproportionate identification of disabilities among particular ethnic/racial groups. For instance, Native Americans are 24% more likely than their peers to receive a learning disability label and African Americans are 59% more likely than their counterparts to be identified with emotional/behavioral disorders (Artiles).

From Life as a Primary Text to the Canon

In a traditional “banking concept” of schooling, students are the consumers of knowledge and information (see Freire). Whatever is deemed the “canon” is deposited into them, and they are required to regurgitate the facts in a particular manner and form. As Palmer finds, “The teacher-centered instructional model centers on a teacher who does little more than deliver prescribed conclusions to students (118-119).

In a SAYS classroom space, learning is democratic—and writing, in particular, is viewed as a personal and collective act. Students and the teacher are viewed as active and valuable participants in the cultivation of creativity and knowledge in a process of personal and collective discovery.

The first diagram below provides a simple snapshot of the ways literature is often taught in schools; it is mandated, decontextualized, and then evaluated. This process of regurgitation rarely focuses on deep reading and impactful learning.

Canon + Teacher → Student outcomes

Figure 1: Traditional Approach to Literature

In juxtaposition, SAYS creates a culture of literacy that is participatory, as the diagram below illustrates:

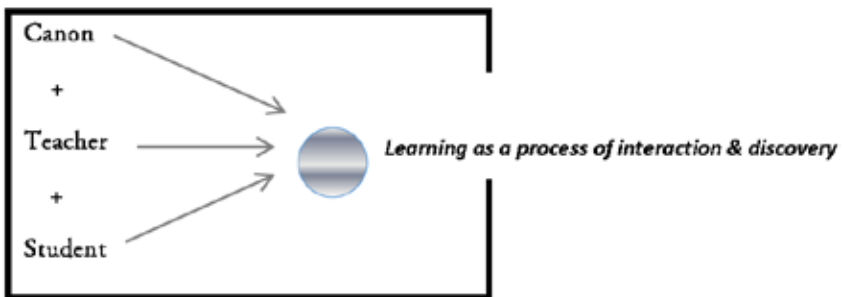


Figure 2: Participatory Approach to Literature

While this pedagogy aligns with spoken word performance poetry activities, how can it connect students to other genres of writing? To provide an example, I will briefly discuss how this pedagogy was applied to the teaching of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlett Letter*. Students in the SAYS treatment classes were mandated to read *The Scarlett Letter*, which was written in 1850. For the youth, this is not a text they are particularly excited about or find relevant to their daily reality. Nevertheless, we proceeded.

Before *The Scarlet Letter* was even introduced, the students were asked to write about revenge, which is a central theme of the story. It’s important to reiterate this point:

Students examined revenge prior to ever seeing or being introduced to *The Scarlet Letter*. The students analyzed the concept of revenge from multiple vantage points through a variety of writing workshops that developed the student's multidimensional analysis of revenge. For instance, as in Figure 3 below, writing sprints and activities focused on moments they experienced revenge personally (self), examples of revenge at school and home (community), historical cases of revenge (past), and contemporary, political instances of revenge inter/nationally (present). As a class, we debated, deconstructed, and wrote extensively on revenge. Through this cycle of inquiry, the class investigated and came to discover their own as well as each other's analysis of revenge. The students reached an important insight when one student argued, "The moment revenge turns into rage you will lose control of yourself and this will impact your actions towards others."

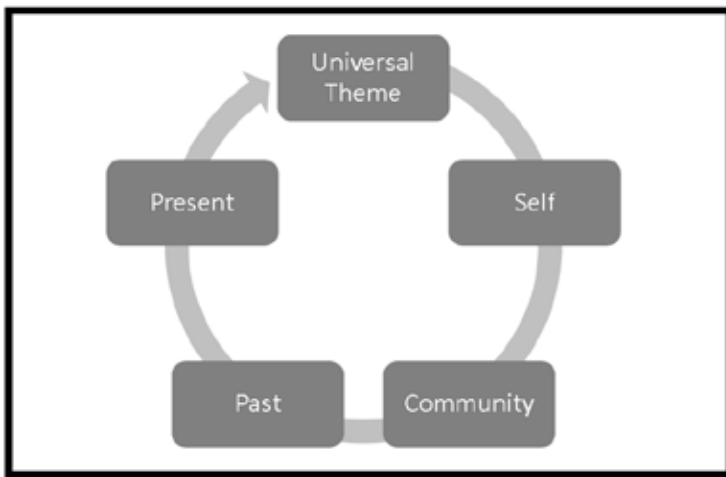


Figure 3: Life as Primary Text: The SAYS Cycle of Deep Learning

Significantly, the shift in power dynamics occurs through the instructional process because students' lives and perspectives serve as the primary text from which they interact with the canon. When everyone had something to say—and their notebooks were full with free-writes, antidotes, and thesis statements about revenge—it was then that *The Scarlet Letter* was introduced to the class. When Hawthorne finally came into play, so to speak, the students were already experts on the destructive nature of revenge and could enter into a dialectical and dialogical relationship with the text. They could discuss why they thought Hester Prynne chose to accept the scarlet letter rather than seek revenge against the father of her child or revenge against the society that branded her as an adulteress. Inevitably, the essays the students produced were of a higher caliber because their interrogation had taken on new meaning about themselves, their world, and the literature. Essentially, this is an example of deep learning.

When life is the primary text, education takes on new meaning. Darder urges teachers to consider such an approach as a “powerful dialogical force for political transformation and as a decolonizing epistemology—a dialectical framework from which we could break through the oppressive structures and practices of hegemonic schooling and society.” In SAYS, the classroom is no longer an extension of colonialism, but an emancipatory window into *democratic sanctuaries*.

Final Thoughts

Something sacred transpires when students, teachers, and community-based poet mentor educators unapologetically and courageously bring their whole selves into the schoolhouse. These classrooms transformed into places where answers were confronted and complicated instead of memorized and revealed. I have wrestled with how to describe and codify the type of learning that is liberatory. In earlier work (*Watson Learning*), I focused on bringing together art and science, arguing that “while teachers are often trained in content expertise (the science of our profession), we are rarely equipped with tools in *communication, community building, compassion, and commitment*, yet these are some of the characteristics that define the art of our craft” (x). These were some of the lessons I gleaned from my qualitative study of community-based educators; I reveled in the art of human connection exhibited between the nontraditional educators and the young people they worked with. Building on this research, I began experiencing something new in the SAYS classes that was not encapsulated in my earlier arguments for the intersections of art and science. I started digging through years of information and layers of discoveries, I revisited SAYS classrooms, and took meticulous notes in a range of SAYS spaces, trying to pinpoint and authentically understand what I was witnessing.

In my final depiction below (Figure 4), I delineate how the art and the science of teaching are only two elements of the pedagogy that takes place in SAYS classrooms. There is a third element that enables students to *transcend* the limits of traditional teaching. The word “transcend” comes from the Latin prefix “trans” meaning “beyond,” and the Latin verb *ascendere* meaning “to climb.” To become transcendent is to go beyond the material structures of a traditional pedagogy that divide, categorize, and conquer. A pedagogy that transcends can actually help us climb toward unity within ourselves and within our communities. I discovered that the critical, missing element in my earlier interpretations of the pedagogy in SAYS classrooms was “soul.” Combined with the art and science of teaching, a pedagogy with soul can lead to the kind of transformative learning that enables students to unite, and in that unity, to yearn for and seek social justice.

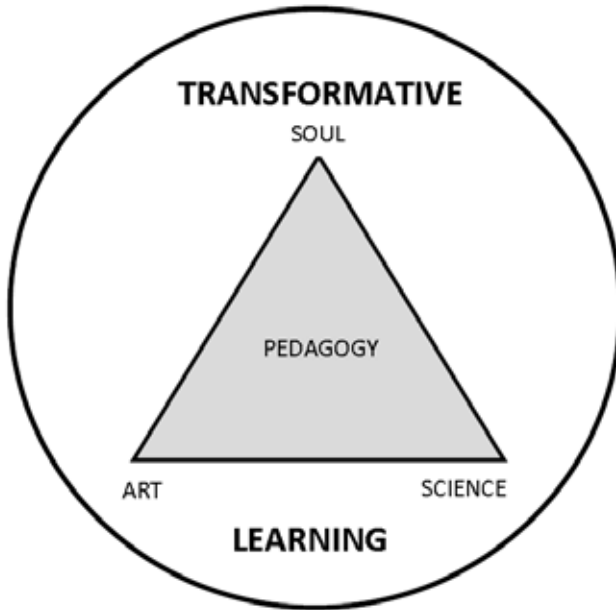


Figure 4: Pedagogical Structure of Transformative Learning

In *Education and the Aim of Human Life*, Pavitra observes, “You must find, in the depths of your being, that which carries in it the seed of universality, limitless expansion, timeless continuity. Then you decentralize, spread out, [and] enlarge yourself; you begin to live in everything and in all beings; the barriers separating individuals from each other break down” (74). In Mayan culture, the law of *In Lak’ech Ala K’in* means “I am you, and you are me.” Chicano playwright Luis Valdez adopted this concept and put it into a poem. An excerpt from this poem was recited by students in Arizona schools until it was outlawed by the state legislature in 2010 for “politicizing students and breeding resentment against whites.”⁶

In Lak’ech
Tú eres mi otro yo.
You are my other me.
Si te hago daño a ti,
If I do harm to you,
Me hago daño a mi mismo.
I do harm to myself.
Si te amo y respeto,
If I love and respect you,
Me amo y respeto yo.
I love and respect myself.

6. Go to: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/13/in-laketch_n_6464604.html. It is unfortunate that the head of the Arizona state education department and the Arizona state legislature found the poem so threatening.

When the art, science, and soul of our pedagogical practices are aligned, we begin to see ourselves and our students with renewed capabilities. As Buddhist philosopher, Daisaku Ikeda teaches, an echo within the heart allows human beings to transcend the barriers of generations and genealogies. Applying these concepts to the classroom is relatively new, yet teaching demands something more if we are to decolonize and revolutionize the ways we learn. We need classrooms that are both analytical and emotional; scientific and spiritual; theoretical and practical. May we use classrooms as critical participatory spaces of intellectual discovery. May we open our textbooks, our notebooks, and ourselves—alongside our students—with renewed sensibilities, courageous capabilities, and dare to do education differently.



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